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Violence

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Do we live in an especially violent time?

It seems easy to arrive at a positive answer to this question. To be convinced that we live in an especially violent time we have only to think of the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Senator Robert Kennedy; the riots in the Watts, Detroit, and other urban areas; police violence; the war in Vietnam, the rising crime rate. But the answer is not quite as simple as many people think it is. In the first place, we have to distinguish between violence against people and violence against things. There is a world of difference between beating up or killing another person and stealing or destroying things. Only those for whom there is no difference between life and property will miss this difference.

Furthermore, we have to distinguish between incidental violence which may arise out of actions of protest or affirmations of certain views and intended violence which is aimed at the violation of others. Although it is often not simple to draw a clear line between these two kinds-of violence by and large they represent two forms of violence which can be distinguished from each other.

The cry for 'law and order' which is raised in the name of stopping violence can in itself be an expression o violence. It can be--and often is--rooted in the wish to use force to suppress unpopular opinions or attitudes. „Law and order" is an emotionally charged slogan which often speaks against minority violence while the mood behind it may be just as violent as that which it claims to fight.

Much has been said recently about the rising crime rates and the published statistics on it have frightened many people. But statistics, here as in any other case, can be very deceptive. It has been pointed out by specialists that owing to a number of circumstances the real rise in the crime rate is not nearly as drastic as statistic make it appear.

Perhaps it would also help to clarify the concept of violence if we did not define it in behavioral terms but rather in motivational terms, that is of violent action rooted in hate and destructiveness.

When all these qualifications are made, the fact seems to remain that there exists a mood of violence which, if anything, seems to be increasing. It is probably not greater than in many other historical periods, and in this sense one could not call our time especially violent. But it is greater than one would expect from a relatively affluent and literate population which has all the objective possibilities of

solving its economic and social problems in the foreseeable future.

Hate and destructiveness are impulses which obscure rational and objective thinking and easily create a polarization in that they reinforce each other on both sides of the political spectrum. Since, I believe, the future of the human race depends on rational planning based on mutual understanding the study of violence is of importance.

Is violence inherent in human nature?

The affirmative answer to this question is old. From Hobbes to Freud to Konrad Lorenz, the assumption has been that man is an inherently aggressive animal. This assumption made by Freud in his concept of the life instinct and the death instinct, and by Freudian psychoanalysts who did not follow Freud in this assumption but postulated the existence of a destructive instinct in man. Lorenz shares this concept of an aggressive instinct and combines it with assumption about inherited aggressiveness rooted in the evolution of men from animals. According to these psychoanalysts and Lorenz, aggressiveness is spontaneously produced within the nervous system. It grows and accumulates and must be expressed if it is not to explode against or without a person's intention. Aggressiveness in this view does not need a special stimulus or provocation. It arises by itself and seeks and finds those stimuli which give it a chance to express itself. As Lorenz puts it in his book *On Aggression*, we don't have aggression because we have different political parties, but we have different political parties because we carry aggression within ourselves.

Certain qualifications are made in these theories: that aggression may be channeled into relatively non-destructive activities like sports, and that eventually it might be balanced by the increasing development of love. But the essential point remains that aggression is constantly produced as a result of certain chemical processes within the neurophysiological system and, hence, that man is confronted with the task of controlling this rising aggressiveness of finding the most useful and proper outlets for it. Freud's theory concerning the death- and life-instinct postulate that the destructive tendencies are constantly battling with the life tendencies and, furthermore, that the destructive tendencies are either directed toward oneself, producing illness or eventually death, or toward others.

This view of the innate nature of aggressiveness and destructiveness in man has its counterpart in opposite views which are somewhat interrelated. One of these, propounded by the French enlightenment philosophers asserts that man is good by nature and that he his destructive only because social circumstances corrupt him. A second view, to be found among many psychologists, is that aggressiveness-destructiveness is not an instinct either in the Freudian sense or-in that of Lorenz-- and is not inherent in human nature as such but is rather *learned*. In many ways this theory is a more scientific elaboration of the enlightenment attitude.

A third view originally presented by John Dollard and his colleagues is that aggression is always the result of frustration. This means that if people are not frustrated, they will not become aggressive, or, to put it in different words, aggression as such is not inherent in human nature.

These views about the cause of aggressiveness and destructiveness in man present serious theoretical difficulties. The main problem with the idea that ag-

gressiveness is an instinct charged with a spontaneously increasing energy lies in the extraordinary variability of aggressiveness among individuals and societies. Clinical and anthropological evidence shows that there are individuals and societies with extremely low degrees of aggressive and destructive behavior--both toward the outside and against themselves--and that there are others in which destructiveness in both directions is very high. If aggressiveness is an instinct analogous to hunger and sexual desire, these differences can hardly be explained.

A-purely biological consideration also weakens the parallel between the sexual and destructive instincts. From a teleological viewpoint that natural processes are shaped by a purposes, nature is interested in the propagation of the race, and hence it is understandable that sexual desire is an ever-present impulse. But destructive actions have a survival function only in cases of attack; therefore the assumption that they follow the same pattern as sexual desire is lacking in a biological rationale. It should also be mentioned that recent neurophysiological studies indicate that the aggressive center in the lower brain which can be localized, is balanced by an inhibiting center, so that it does not lead to the development of a self-propelling destructiveness.

The assumption concerning the hereditary influence of animal hostility on man is contradicted by the fact that mammal particularly most primates, are much less aggressive and destructive than man. There almost no killing of members of the same species, and there is no lust to kill members of other species.

On the other hand, the assumption that man is good by nature and that his destructiveness and hate are only learned or acquired by habit does not seem to take sufficient account of the depth, intensity and frequency of destructiveness, hate, and violence in the history of man. Human destructiveness is more frequent and more intense than that found in the animal kingdom and therefore must be explained as a result of specific conditions of human existence rather than as animal heredity or a neurophysiologal necessity.

Any attempt to find explanations for the causes of human violence must begin by distinguishing various kinds of aggressiveness which are qualitatively different from each other and which have entirely different sources. As long as one uses the word „aggressiveness“ on the one hand for the behavior of a child who is not inhibited in trying to get what he wants and on the other hand for the actions of a murderer, one cannot arrive at an understanding of the sources of violent or destructive behavior. I shall try to give here a brief outline of the main types of human aggressiveness I have found to exist.

The most widespread type of aggressiveness is *reactive or defensive aggressiveness.* Every animal exhibits this type of aggressiveness when its vital interests--life, territory, food, the young, or access to females--are threatened (unless the animal reacts instinctively with flight). These threats, to vital interests must constitute a „clear and present danger” in order to stimulate an aggressive reaction. Man also reacts with aggression in defense of his vital interests, but certain specifically human characteristics cause him to experience this aggressiveness and more frequently than does any other animal.

Man’s capacity to think and to be aware permit him to visualize future dangers. Thus he may aggressively toward future as well as present dangers. (If such visualization of future danger is based exclusively on logical possibilities and not on the principle of empirical likelihood, we deal with paranoid thinking.)

Man’s vital interests go beyond those of other animals. Man is a symbol-

making animal and he need to orient himself in life by choosing certain values, images,, persons; and institutions as sacred in the sense that he could not live and remain sane if he gave them up. Hence an attack against these values, whether they be an idol, the tribe, mother, the nation, the idea of honor, or whatever else sustains his psychic life, is of the same nature as an attack against his life in a biological sense. It does not matter in this context whether rationally the value or symbol he defends makes sense; what matters from a psychological standpoint is that for him they are necessary in order to live and retain his psychic equilibrium and that any threat to them is a threat to his vital interests.

Another specifically human faculty is man's suggestibility. If his leaders try to make him believe that he is or will be threatened, and if he lacks critical judgment and is prone to accept as reality what his leaders tell him is real, he will react to the alleged threat in the same way as he reacts to a real threat. It does not matter whether he is really threatened; what matters is whether he is convinced of the threat, and this depends upon the degree of his dependence on his leaders, his suggestibility, and his lack of critical thinking.

Descriptively, reactive aggressiveness is characterized by the fact that it is provoked by a real or alleged threat to vital interests, that it disappears when the threat has been warded off, and that the aggressive act is itself purpose-determined and does not produce any considerable amount of lustful feeling. Neurophysiologically, it is rooted in the increase of man's aggressive energies over his aggression-inhibiting energies. This increase results from the threat to vital interests, which upsets the normal balance.

Very different from reactive aggressiveness is *lustful destructiveness*, which is specifically human and does not serve the purpose of survival--biologically or socially--but produces an intense, lustful excitement. The best known example of lustful aggression is what is called sadism. Sadism is generally understood to mean taking pleasure in hurting and humiliating--physically or morally--another person or an animal. In the psychoanalytic view, sadism is a partial drive of the libido before genital sexuality has more or less absorbed all partial drives. In other words, sadism in this view is essentially a sexual phenomenon. From my own observations I come to other conclusions. I see in sadism one particular expression of a more general impulse, namely, a desire for absolute and complete control over another human being, an animal, or even things. This desire for such absolute control can also occur between the sexes and can be blended with sexual excitement, particularly if the other partner is masochistically inclined and enjoys being beaten, humiliated, or otherwise hurt. The very blending between the desire to control and the sexual aspect of sadism has a certain self-limiting function. The sexual excitement and its release closes the circle, and there is no further wish for destruction beyond that achieved in the sexual performance. The principle of lustful and absolute control over other people or things is by no means restricted to the realm of sexual excitement. The teacher humiliating or beating or intimidating a pupil; the prison guard venting his rage by threatening of humiliating a helpless prisoner; the hospital nurse doing the same in disguised form to the patient who for social or physical reasons is not able to protest; the master mercilessly beating his dog when it does not perform as he wished--these are only some examples of lustful destructiveness which is not in itself part of the sexual drive. Very often the lust for complete control shows itself in the wish to torture another person since there is hardly any way to experience absolute control over another person more completely than by forcing him to endure pain

when he has no means of defending himself or fighting back.

Lustful destructiveness does not always take an obvious form such as torture. It may take the form of strangling another person's will, spontaneity, or freedom. Destructiveness of this sort is often rationalized as motivated by good intentions or even love. There is one syndrome of such destructiveness which is not rare, especially in mass behavior, that is, the ''rape-robbery-destruction'' syndrome. I am referring here to what can be observed in the behavior of victorious soldiers, in ancient or modern war, if for a limited time they have permission to take absolute control over a conquered population. The indiscriminate raping of women is not so much an expression of sexual desire as of absolute control, as is the stealing of what can be stolen and the destruction of what cannot be carried away. In other words, characteristic of lustful destructiveness is a sense of omnipotence, the desire to transcend the limitations of human existence even if only for a day, to feel like God, to feel that there is nothing which can resist one's power.

One finds this type of desire for omnipotence in individuals when circumstances give them the unlimited power. (Camus has shown this mechanism very clearly in the chief character of his play *Caligula*. Among those for whom there is no possibility of ever having such real power, there is a chance to wield power for a moment or a day. For these people the experience is so intense that in many cases they would prefer be willing to die as a price for one moment of this omnipotence. This wish for absolute control of and power over a helpless minority is often a chronic feeling which can be triggered into action under certain circumstances. A telling example was the Nazi movement.

One of the chief reasons for the development of this type of lustful destructiveness is a deep sense of impotence (not necessarily sexual), of unaliveness, of boredom, of passivity, of the dread of a never-changing routine, and of the grayness of daily life which possesses many people. The impotent person in this sense is uncreative in thought, in feeling, in personal relationships, in art--and finds his deep satisfaction in that which is only one step less miraculous than creating life, namely, destroying life. It is true that creating life requires the capacity at least for sexual potency if not for love; or, if we do not deal with physical life, it requires activity, participation, and interest. Destroying life requires nothing but a pistol, a knife, or a strong hand. The one whom life eludes finds intense satisfaction in at least showing himself the complete master over the life which he cannot grasp. This type of destructiveness is characterized by strong visceral feelings in which the whole body participate, and that is why it is so often confused with sexual excitement. But not all bodily or visceral excitement is sexual excitement, although they can be easily blended.

A particular form of lustful destructiveness which I want to mention only in passing is ecstatic hate. In the state of ecstasy the individual overcomes the split between himself and the world around him since he rids himself of all awareness and thought and in some peculiar way becomes one with himself or with the world outside. All his energies are channeled in one direction, and there is no more uncertainty left. The state of ecstasy can be produced by the sexual act, by drugs, by rhythm, or by an autosuggestive trance. And all these forms are essentially benevolent since they are expressions of life, even though they may not be the highest and most advanced form of ecstatic experience-- that of the quiet union with oneself and the world which represents the state of active harmony.

There is only one truly one *malevolent* form of ecstasy and that is the ec-

stasy of hate and destructiveness. In this ecstasy the person become completely absorbed in his hate and destructiveness; he is „beside himself" because he is completely seized by fury and the wish to kill and to control. In this absoluteness of hate he is thoroughly unified, but at the same time he loses contact with the world outside him and also with his own self. This „sacred fury" leads close to the border of madness and to a sense of isolation by the loss of all solidarity with life and the living.

In contrast to lustful destructiveness, which is the perversion of potency and of love and is still an expression of life, *necrophilia* is a cold, unalive attraction to death, decay, sickness and the purely mechanical. There are many people who are mainly or even exclusively attracted by that which is not alive but dead, controlled, purely mechanical, and hence foreseeable and predictable. In contrast to these people are the „biophilous" people who love life and are attracted by all that grows, by structure, by development, by the non-mechanical, and the non-predictable. The average person will speak of somebody in whom the love of life is a characteristic feature; on the other hand he might, without applying any psychological categories or terms, be aware of a person who is unalive and and attracted to the purely mechanical. In the dreams of the prevailingly necrophilous people feces, dismembered bodies, tombs and caves without exit are prevalent or at least very frequent. Necrophilia can be diagnosed from the Rorschach inkblot tests from interpretive questionnaires.[1]

There are many people in whom one finds a mixture of necrophilous and biophilous tendencies and in whom a conflict exists; an inner struggle determines which of the two tendencies to be prevalent. There are others who are almost totally biophilous or necrophilous and in these cases it is difficult to imaging changes short of the most unexpected circumstances. I am prone to assume that in the extremely necrophilous cases one finds certain unique constitutional elements, although this assumption is only based on the fact that the intensity of the necrophilous disposition cannot be accounted for by life circumstances alone. Generally speaking, an atmosphere of non stimulation, unaliveness, and crudeness seems to be an important factor for the development of necrophilic tendencies. For this reason necrophilia is to be found more frequently in those social strata which are excluded from the hopes and possibilities of those who form the mainstream of an evolving society.

Although I have tried to show why man has more reactive aggression than the animal has, it remains to be added that the sense of boredom, impotence, and unaliveness which is at the bottom of lustful destructiveness, and the lack of alive stimulation which is essential for the development of necrophilia, are specifically human experiences. The animal, living by his instincts, essentially has no such problems though they can be created artificially in the laboratory.

Although the various types of aggressiveness-destructiveness differ in quality and origin, they often overlap. It is especially important to note that there is a trigger mechanism which leads to the outburst of lustful destructiveness or necrophilia as a result of reactive aggressiveness. We can observe this particularly in wars, where the soldier has permission to kill the enemy. In some soldiers this first breaking of the taboo on killing will lead to the emergence of sadistic and ne-

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[1] For the whole concept of necrophilia and biophilia see Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, New York, Harper and Row, 1964; The use of the Rorschach test and interpretative questionnaires is explained in the work of Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby, *Social Character in a Mexican Village*, New York 1970 and 1996.

crophilous impulses, and these soldiers will be prone to indulge in lustful, cruel acts to the degree to which they can get away with it. They might never have indulged in such acts if the first step were not eased for them. But while this is so, it is also true that despite the lifting of the taboo on killing only a small percentage of soldiers commit cruel acts and enjoy destruction. If we had more exact data on soldiers' behavior in modern war, I believe we would find convincing evidence that the percentage of intense sadistic and necrophilous people is not nearly as great as many people believe or as the theory of the destructive instinct would make one expect. It is regrettable that such data has not yet been systematically collected and analyzed. They would add a deal to our knowledge about the acts of aggression and destruction among a normal population, even under the special conditions of war.

What can we do to control destructiveness?

The question whether the United States today has a climate which breeds violence must be answered affirmatively, but not only violence is shown in the movies and comic strips or because many Americans live under conditions of extreme poverty within a culture in which increasing consumption is praised, implicitly or explicitly, as an aim of life. There are still other roots for the existing level of violence. A feeling of anxiety has pervaded the American population: the entire population is anxious, though often unconsciously, about the possibility of nuclear war; both, whites and blacks, fear that one group might wish to destroy the other; and the middle calls is worried about slipping on the ladder of success. There are still other important factors which breed a temper of violence and destructiveness: the mechanization of life, the powerlessness of the individual, the passivity of the consumer, and the unaliveness which results from this passivity, the fact that we have no vision and aim for the development of our society other than more production and more consumption, and the deep contradiction between the values which we profess and those according to which we act. Conditions such as these create a mind which is conducive to violence and destructiveness for those who lack material comforts, whose hopes and expectations have little chance of being fulfilled, and who do not participate in the progress of the majority of the American population. On the other hand, those who do participate in this progress, while deep down also anxious and isolated, succeed in replacing these feelings by their daily routine, by the expectation of being successful in their personal lives, and by the ever-changing patterns of consumption. But in the long run fear, uncertainty, and boredom will tend to increase violence in the whole population; the minority will rebel more and the majority will take increasingly violent countermeasures against rebellious attempts.

Stricter punishment and enforcement of law and order will not reduce violence; on the contrary, it will increase violence, because it will create new resentments, hostilities and frustrations in those exposed to the organized violence of the state. The only means for changing the general tendency toward violence and destructiveness lies in the humanization of our technological society. By this I mean that our society must serve human ends--the growth and development of man--rather than make means such as production and consumption into ends.[2]

The individual must cease to feel and to be powerless to influence the life of

[2] Cf. Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope*, New York, Harper and Row and Bantam Books, 1968.

society by which his own life is governed. This change can occur only by a great increase of participation and responsibility on the part of those who now are merely well fed and well amused but excluded from effective participation in political decisions or in the policies of the institutions and enterprises they work in. It is crucial, furthermore, that we reduce our compulsive consumption, which increases the passiveness of the person, and find new ways of actively expressing human faculties. Today, thinking and feeling are more and more separated from each other, and this separation leads either to an almost schizophrenic intellectualism or to a neurotic, irrational emotionalism. Only if emotions and reason are brought together can man function in a way which makes life interesting and hence creates the possibility of a productive and non-violent life. To put it briefly, what we need is not increasing control of aggression and violence but reduction of destructiveness and violence by making individual and social life more meaningful and human.

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